



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence by Nagisa Oshima; Jeremy Thomas
Karen Jaehne

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and the most terrifying truths, and might be said to be the latest of a series of metaphysical horror films. But these films are much more than exquisite images of desolation—nothing could be further from a passive acceptance of the world's ills. "Profoundly political in its objective,"⁸ Antonioni's work seeks to expose the inherent contradictions of our age, and offers the prerequisite for effecting positive change, understanding. In this context, *Identification of a Woman* is the most severe of Antonioni's films, and, as he has described it, his "most sincere."⁹ —WILLIAM KELLY

NOTES

1. In 1979, Antonioni made *Il Misterio di Oberwald* for Italian television. Based on one of Cocteau's lesser plays, "The Eagle Has Two Heads," it was shot and edited in video and later transferred to film. Hardly an "Antonioni film," its only real interest lies in the director's use of electronic color modification within scenes. In addition, his extensive use of the video technique of keying in may have caused Antonioni to reassess the value of dissolves in film.
2. *Film Makers On Film Making*, ed. Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 208.
3. Antonioni, *ibid.*, p. 209.
4. Eugene Marais, *The Soul of the Ape*, (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 174. A study of the origins of primate consciousness, this is the book that book Locke and Robertson coincidentally

were reading in *The Passenger*. Besides being a naturalist, Marais was many things, including journalist and gun-runner.

5. Although this is their initial conversation, it is the second time we see him talk to Mavi. Using a strategy he deployed in *Zabriskie Point* (the flashback of Daria's first scene), Antonioni structures a large portion of *Identification*, from Niccolo's wait in Carla's office to Mavi's late arrival at Niccolo's apartment, as a flashback which isn't immediately apparent as such.

6. *The Making of the Modern Mind*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 100. One further indication of the persistence of this theme in Antonioni's work is the title of his aborted Amazon project, "Technically Sweet," which he took from a comment by Robert Oppenheimer: "If one has a glimpse of something that seems technically sweet, one attacks this thing and achieves it." (Quoted in R. T. Witcombe, *The New Italian Cinema*, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1982], p. 8.)

7. This is not to say that science fiction is intrinsically so, but, unfortunately, it is a rare film of the genre that escapes this description. Antonioni himself is not opposed to science fiction per se, as indicated in his own thwarted plans to make a science fiction film in the Soviet Union (see "La Méthode de Michelangelo Antonioni," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 342, December 1982, p. 64). Also, while Niccolo's intention to make *any* film could be seen as some kind of victory, the context of *Identification* renders it a shallow one at best.

8. Witcombe, p. 3.

9. Antonioni, before the screening of the film at the 1982 New York Film Festival.

MERRY CHRISTMAS, MR. LAWRENCE

Director: Nagisa Oshima. Script: Oshima and Paul Mayersberg. Producer: Jeremy Thomas. Photography: Toichiro Narushima. Editing: Tomoyko Oshima. Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto. Universal.

The offensive and defensive postures adopted by the characters and cultures in Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* seems to appeal to many of the conventions of the POW camp genre: "captivating captives," whose cultural identity holds their captors enthralled. The close quarters of the camp create the razor's edge of a truce, where all psychological thrusts and parries of ideological conflict seem locked in combat, like ancient warriors frozen in grappling postures on classical Greek vases. The monopoly on violence held by the Japanese running the camp is counterpoised by the monopoly on spirit held by the British prisoners. Unfortunately (for those of us skeptics who don't believe in it), Oshima seems to have swallowed many of the clichés of the "there will always be an England" sort and regurgitated them in the immortal, Kabuki-like face of certainty that there will, indeed, always be a Japan. These little islands of empire, each providing a pristine model for its hemisphere's notions of honor and dignity, have provided Oshima the subject for a dialectic exercise. Ideas loom

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larger than characters, indeed displacing them for the most part.

Contributing to Oshima's strategy is David Bowie, whose tactics are those of his musical performances—the synthesis of a character's form and function into mime-like elegance. (Perhaps Bowie's early training in mime has shaped his performances more than has been suspected.) Bowie does not embody or act; he represents. His powerful presence renders him a cipher or hieroglyphic distillation of whatever it is he is meant to portray. In Oshima's hands, which are adept at the brush strokes of Japanese characters, this Englishman becomes a "Japanese translation" of all that is essentially English—from William the Conqueror to Oscar Wilde. For Western audience, it is Bowie's presence, even more than that of the quixotic and exotic Japanese cast, which stylizes the film.

While most contemporary war films attempt to deglamorize their subject, Oshima's virtually mythologizes the role of the warrior and uses the POW camp as the last bastion of archaic, personalized warfare. On the other hand, it seems that whole civilizations are represented by these warriors. Based on the novel *The Seed and the Sower* by Laurens van der Post, the film addresses itself to cross-cultural affinities and misunderstandings. The absurdity and incomprehension of these two very diverse cultures at war is the point of the film—made perfectly clear by Oshima at his Cannes press conference, a point which the following review will attempt to sort out.

A prisoner of war camp in Java in 1942 is being run by a young commandant, Captain Yonoi, in utter disregard of conventions agreed upon at Geneva or anywhere else concerning the treatment of prisoners. The opening scene conjures up all the hoary tales of Japan's wartime atrocities and violence. Yonoi has ordered one of his Korean guards to commit harakiri—intending to do him a favor!—for homosexually fraternizing with the enemy, a young Dutch prisoner, De Jong. Colonel Lawrence, the British liaison between prisoners and the commander, convinces Yonoi to postpone it, until after his return from a military tribunal. The De Jong affair seems to be incomprehensibly inflated by the hysterical Yonoi, but it gradually acquires the value of a psychogram for the relationship Yonoi

develops with an excessively handsome new prisoner, Jack Celliers, whom he brings back to the camp after attending his military trial.

Celliers enters the camp ready to radicalize an already antagonized situation. Both British and Japanese show signs of breaking under the strain. The eponymous hero of the film (modestly and minimally played by English actor Tom Conti) seems to have the proverbial overview, and yet he is incapable of imparting a shred of his wisdom or even understanding to either side. The Japanese seem loath to lend credence to the higher rationality he represents, as if there can be no values other than the sheer self-interest of either party. Lawrence's own colleague, Captain Hicksley (Jack Thompson), finds himself more in line with the enemy's estimation of Colonel Lawrence than one would hope; but then Hicksley is an Australian and more British than the British in his attention to military detail. Lawrence subsequently becomes a kind of moral midpoint between the two sides, the almost Renoirian man of reason and discretion and sense, against whom the twin opposed tragic views play themselves out to mutual disaster.

Colonel Lawrence becomes the fulcrum in the development of this relationship, both in his official capacity as the liaison officer and in his interest in and understanding of Japanese culture. His role is to mediate for the

What "Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence" means has been the single most controversial question about the film—a semantic controversy which raises the problem of "cultural contamination" (an unpopular and unfashionable anthropological theory that goes with the idea of "cultural evolution") to the same level of abstraction Nagisa Oshima previously attained in the existential eroticism of *Empire of the Senses*. The barriers that exist between cultures become most evident in a simple comparison of this film's sundry release titles. In Japan, the expression "Merry Christmas" is virtually without meaning for obvious reasons, and it takes on a somewhat exotic, evocative flavor comparable to Americans brandishing "Sayonara." The Japanese title is *Senjo no Merry Xmas* (Merry Christmas on the Battlefield), guaranteed to create some confusion about the story, which does not include a battlefield. In Europe the Japanese title *Furyo* leaves little doubt about its Japanese origins, while a translation remains deliberately unavailable (it means "prisoner of war").

military and translate languages and customs, but, in the case of Yonoi and Celliers, to stand by helplessly, because their communication takes place in a realm beyond translation—in a “realm of offenses” that can only be understood by Yonoi and Celliers. The meta-physical conflict of kindred spirits, both of them warriors removed from the “real” battlefield, necessitates waging war on a cultural and psychological plane. The Japanese tradition of conformity to type—even if that type evokes the asocial samurai—is confronted by an equally strong and culturally valid tradition of the outsider found in the English eccentric, even when the eccentric such as Celliers is serving the most rigid of British institutions, its military. Although this conflict seems waged in the stratosphere of the abstract, Oshima portrays a mysterious unity of spirit and potential for agonized mutual respect between radically different cultures, defying each other momentarily in a bizarre manner not at all befitting officers and gentlemen in the traditions of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *La Grande Illusion*.

Oshima’s preference for filming taboo subjects is here reflected in his framing the story as one of homosexual bonding between avowed enemies, made explicit in the opening scene and implicit in the male bonding that dominates the military life of a POW camp. In repeated interviews, Oshima naively claimed, “I just wanted to show that a homosexual rapport can exist between two supposed enemies.” One could go even further and assert that, from a psychological point of view, a “rapport” or desire must exist between enemies, even ones intent on mutual annihilation, because, as luminaries such as Norman Mailer have so distressingly illustrated, the will to survive is inextricably entangled with the sex drive. Moreover, the destructive nature of that will, that drive toward total possession, is demonstrated and surely vented in the rape and plunder after battle. In *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, the only trophies available to the Japanese are the captives themselves, while to the British, every instance of Japanese frustration is a kind of trophy. Yet in a POW camp, as in a prison, both guards and guarded are “captives” in the strictest sense of the word. From Celliers’s perspective, it would seem that the sexual instinct is the best way



Major Celliers and Captain Yonoi in
MERRY CHRISTMAS MR. LAWRENCE

to destroy Yonoi; the enemy is to be violated where he is most vulnerable and repressed.

For reasons not made entirely clear (although the very idea invokes those experts from this film’s noble ancestor who blew up their bridge on the Kwai), Yonoi repeatedly asks Lawrence for the names of the munitions experts in his company and is denied the information, which sends him into fits of outrage and cruelty. In one of these scenes, when Yonoi has exposed himself to the cruelest depths by commanding all the prisoners to witness a beheading, Celliers rushes forth, breaking ranks, to kiss Yonoi, infusing the hatred with its exuberant alternative, love or eroticism. Effectively, he “rapes” Yonoi, who loses his consciousness and even his post as camp commander. Celliers’s act is a calculated kamikazi dive, meant to humiliate Yonoi, for which Celliers is put to death by the succeeding commander in an ignominious and barbaric fashion associated with POW tales from the South Pacific: he is buried up to his neck and left in the sun to die. The visual impact is that of a beheading—and, of course, psychologically speaking, castration.

The motivation for Jack Celliers’s defiant stance is to be found in flashback sequences of his youth and his relationship to his little brother (James Malcolm). Defying Yonoi’s command that the prisoners be put on a fast, Celliers saunters in with food, openly flaunting Yonoi’s authority. Celliers and Lawrence are locked away in the stockade together. Here, Celliers confesses to “an expertise in betrayal” and sequences from their youth at boarding school reveals a complicated relationship with his little brother, whose slight deformity contrasts with the Aryan splendor

of David Bowie. But the kid can sing! The young boy desperately wants his older brother's approval, which his song so aptly expresses, and this, presumably, foreshadows Yonoi's more repressed appeal for approval. Ah, but the imagination is stretched even further.

Scenes at the school are given a very stylized presentation. There is, for example, a complicated camera movement from an empty quad to a close-up of the two brothers on vacant steps leading nowhere. Jack's failure to rescue or intervene in a tormenting hazing of his little brother looms over the scene. Shots of the family garden, lush and too tropical for England (shot, in fact, in New Zealand), then establish a lyrical mood over the memory sequences, and they presumably explain a later remark of Celliers: "I wish I could sing," suggesting—again, presumably—"I wish I had the devotion and the purity of talent of my little brother." Nevertheless, it doesn't work; the flashback sequences serve as a psychological explication and a delay mechanism where none is necessary. They break the tension of the progression of events in the camp itself which has sharpened to become a microcosm of the war in the Pacific as personified by the characters Yonoi and Celliers.

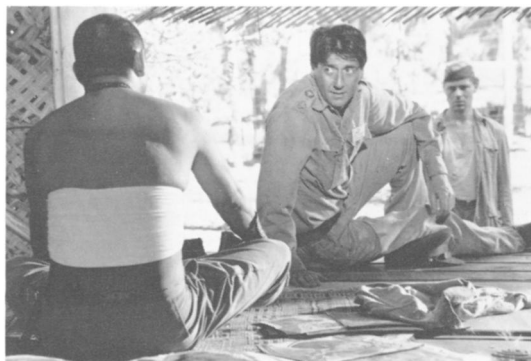
By reserving the leading roles for rock-stars, Oshima takes advantage of the cultural icons made possible by popular culture's elevation of currently fashionable and glamorous types. An even more direct appeal to such trendiness is made by the film's score, a powerful fusion of Japanese rock and electronic music appropriately subtle for a complex film, composed by Bowie's opposite number in the film and in real-life Japan, Ryuichi Sakamoto, a 31-year-old keyboard wizard and soloist who also did the vocal version of the theme from *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*.

Sakamoto in the role of Yonoi brings to it no less panache than that which Bowie brings to a role, and both stars serve Oshima's purpose. The director's stated interest in singers lies in what he calls their "very vivid sense of representation and of modernity," which could be explained, in part, by a singer's need to compress into the few minutes of a song the interpretation of an entire character or situation, while the "modernity" need be

explained only in terms of their contemporary success, however ephemeral. Certainly, the audience's inevitable awareness that it is David Bowie playing the role (and for the Japanese, the equally great awareness of Sakamoto) necessitates a contemporary interpretation of the conflict in the film. It is, however, undermined by allowing Bowie the line, "I wish I could sing." Too self-reflective, it draws attention to the idolatry surrounding these performers, and Oshima runs the risk of giving their characters the abstract quality of deities. Likewise, Sakamoto's make-up is pronounced and appropriate more to "performance" than to acting, setting him apart from the more naturalistic Japanese characters. It should, furthermore, be noted that Yonoi's personal style on the film would have been as much a cultural throwback then as the current fad for Kabuki in transistorized Japan.

In contrast, other characters are given more depth by good character actors such as Jack Thompson, who plays Captain Hicksley, a bow-legged soldier's soldier and Australian macho who seems to be such a clear and uncomplicated alternative to Colonel Lawrence, as well as his second in command, that Yonoi would like to replace Lawrence with Hicksley—a highly irregular move, since the highest ranking officer is, by regulation, the liaison officer between his fellow prisoners and the camp commander. Hicksley, in his turn, disapproves of Colonel Lawrence's sensitivity and understanding of Japanese subtleties. Lawrence, however, admits to the limitations of his own understanding when he damns the "Kamigami" or Japanese divinities who create the models for Yonoi's arbitrary cruelty, or even for the superstition of Yonoi's subordinate officer, Sgt. Hara. Sgt. Hara is depicted as draped with sundry medallions and religious tokens, yet he is, like Lawrence, caught between East and West. Played by the renowned Japanese comedian and satirist Takeshi, Sgt. Hara alternates between being jovial and accommodating in the more human characterization of *bushido* (the samurai chivalry of Japan) and being the intimidated puppet of Yonoi.

It is Sgt. Hara who brings the story a certain symmetry in a final scene set four years later in 1946, in a cell where Hara awaits his execution as a war criminal. He has since learned



"Mr." Lawrence, the go-between (Tom Conti).

English (the Lord's prayer, for all the good it will do him!) and the implications of "Merry Christmas," a phrase and excuse he had used in a fit of drunken benevolence to summon Lawrence and Celliers and get them out of the stockade on Christmas eve, 1942. During Lawrence's visit, Hara tells him that Yonoi had asked Hara to dedicate Celliers's lock of hair at an ancestral shrine.

Yonoi's intentions upon cutting that lock of hair from the still visible head of the buried Celliers become clear. Yonoi's acknowledgement of Celliers's powers are made explicit, and they become again the focus of the film. Like the reversal of fortunes that characterizes Hara's and Lawrence's relationship, the lock of hair implies Celliers's "victory over death," at least, however, he had already been made a martyr in a scene of the head scorched in the sun, photographed through a fence so that the barbed wire creates striations across the image, while the camera moves in to reveal a white moth hovering around the cheek. It is at this point that Yonoi, to the general amazement of the assembly from the camp, cuts a lock of Celliers's hair and then steps back to salute the unconscious head, or perhaps the "winged spirit" implied by the moth. (The symbolic value of the moth, it turns out, was not part of the original conception but rather an addition suggested by Bowie when the moth made its unerring way into the shot.) The mystical terms of this denouement are in the spirit of *The Seed and the Sower*, from which comes the quotation, "Celliers by his death sowed a seed in Yonoi that we all might share in its growth."

The cross-fertilization of these two cultures has been captured by Oshima at its very incep-

tion—the forgiveness and reconciliation between Lawrence and Hara, who nevertheless dies for war crimes. Lawrence cannot extend to Hara the benevolence he himself had enjoyed, because larger political forces have taken over, out of the control of the individual. Oshima (and script-writer Paul Mayersberg) touch fleetingly here on the problem of war crimes, as Lawrence pronounces Hara one of the "victims of men who think they are right." Slowly the camera pulls up to an overhead shot of their two heads, their features invisible and thereby somehow united as victims. The fundamental question behind Oshima's film about two great military traditions in the confines of a camp—not embattled but rather locked in an embrace of death—is the question of honor. To the Japanese, honor is obedience. To the British, honor is doing the right and just thing. Their combined tragedy is reflected in their mutual obedience to men who think they are doing the right thing.

—KAREN JAEHNE

TESTAMENT

Director: Lynne Littman. Script: John Sacret Young, based on "The Last Testament" by Carol Amen. Photography: Steven Poster. Music: James Horner. Paramount.

Lynne Littman's *Testament* is definitely 1983's most remarkable antinuclear statement from the film industry, all the more notable because, like ABC's *The Day After*, it was also originally a made-for-TV movie (PBS). Unlike *The Day After*, however, which was broadcast as a self-conscious media event with unprecedented fanfare engineered by the network, *Testament*, picked up from PBS by Paramount Pictures, has come and gone as quietly as the proverbial fog on cat's paws. Perhaps it's merely a case of having been drowned in the deluge of the stay-at-home attraction, but whatever the explanation, Littman's is in every way superior to ABC's effort.

Testament is based on Carol Amen's short story, "The Last Testament" (*Ms.*, August, 1981). Littman's interpretation is spare—almost painfully so—even in its occasional embellishments of the original, despite some inserts of heavy-handed symbolism. The small, outer-suburban town of Hamlin in northern California is fifty miles or so from